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SUBJECT: US-BASED IRANIAN POLITICAL ACTIVIST DISCUSSES IRGC, SUPREME
LEADER'S HEALTH, CIVIL SOCIETY

REF: A) 2007 RPO DUBAI 0032; B) RPO DUBAI 0010

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ramin Asgard, Acting Director, Iran Regional
Presence Office, DoS.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S//NF) Summary: US-based Iranian political activist Mohsen Sazegara held a wide-ranging discussion with IRPOff during a recent visit to Dubai. He gave his assessment of Iran's goals in Iraq, identified what he called the "Gang of 7" most influential current and former IRGC officers, and discussed the political consequences of the Supreme Leader's reportedly continued ill health. IRPO is unable to assess his access, but some of his information tracks with other reporting. Sazegara also proposed a plan whereby the international community should block Iran's financial access to its oil revenues to force Iran to negotiate; asserting that the primary goal of the ensuing talks should be to aid Iranian civil society. Sazegara is unabashedly a proponent of fostering a "velvet revolution" in Iran, and claimed to be working with others in the US and European diaspora toward that end. End summary.

Iraq

2.(S//NF) In a recent conversation with IRPOff, Iranian political activist Mohsen Sazegara shared his thoughts on Iran's involvement in Iraq, Iranian leadership and the need for a "velvet revolution" in Iran. Asked his assessment of Qods Force goals in Iraq and who controls Iran's policy on Iraq, Sazegara said that the Supreme Leader and Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani are in control of Iraq policy and that their primary aim in Iraq is to disturb and hamper US efforts there. When pressed about Tehran's ultimate goals--i.e. are their actions in Iraq an attempt to prevent a US attack on Iran, or are there other reasons?--Sazegara conceded that Tehran wants to "keep the US busy" but suggested that US withdrawal from Iraq is also an Iranian goal. (Comment: Sazegara seemed to imply that Iran is more focused on the tactic of hampering US efforts in Iraq than on their overall Iraq strategy. End comment.) Asked about Iranian support of Shia groups who are fighting Iraqi forces, Sazegara acknowledged the support, and added that he even considered Iranian government support for anti-government Sunni groups in Iraq to be plausible. The Iranian leaders are confident that they retain sufficient support among some

elements of the Iraqi government, he asserted, without naming any specific groups or individuals.

IRGC

3.(S//NF) Among current and former IRGC officers, Sazegara identified what he called the "Gang of 7" most influential individuals. They are head of IRGC Intelligence Morteza Rezai; head of IRGC Strategic Studies Bureau Mohammad Hejazi; IRGC Commander Mohammad Ali Aziz Jafari, IRGC Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, former IRGC Commander Yahya Rahim Safavi, Supreme Leader's advisor and IRGC veteran Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr, and head of state broadcasting Ezzatollah Zargami, who was formerly an IRGC officer and a deputy culture minister, and according to open source information, a hostage taker.

4.(S//NF) Sazegara identified the Strategic Studies Bureau of the IRGC as an internal think-tank that holds significant influence and is sometimes consulted by the Supreme Leader. Khamenei exerts control through the IRGC, the MOIS, and a "parallel security force" nominally called the Security Division of the Judiciary Power, he said. When pressed on the "parallel security force" Sazegara said it was comprised of many of the individuals who were responsible for the murders of dissidents in the late 1990s, but did not elaborate further.

Supreme Leader's ill health

5.(S//NF) Sazegara claimed that Supreme Leader Khamenei is clinically depressed and sometimes leaves Tehran for mountain retreats for a week or more, leaving his son Mojtaba in control. (Note: It has been widely reported in the international press that the Supreme Leader suffers from prostate cancer, however

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the claim that he suffers from clinical depression appears new. End note.) On some occasions, Sazegara claimed, Khamenei goes to a Qods Force base in the city of Amol in northern Iran because the base is very secure and the scenery is lovely and relaxing.

Rafsanjani trying to sideline Khamenei's son or Supreme Leader himself?

6.(S//NF) Sazegara said that Expediency Council chair Rafsanjani and the influential Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Mahdavi-Kani are both concerned that the Supreme Leader's son Mojtaba has grown too powerful. (Note: See ref A for more detailed reporting on Mojtaba Khamenei. End note.) According to Sazegara, Rafsanjani and Mahdavi-Kani are not the rivals that the press portrays them as, and Mahdavi-Kani is not seeking the chairmanship of the Assembly of Experts. On the contrary, he said, the two men have collaborated on ways to limit the influence of Mojtaba Khamenei and have been advocating the creation of a "Vice Leader" position, although apparently without success. Sazegara characterized Supreme Leader Khamenei as weak and fearful of losing power, citing this as the reason Khamenei has not designated a successor. (Comment: If this report is accurate, it is another instance of Rafsanjani working to limit the power of the Supreme Leader while Khamenei is still in office rather than after [ref B]. While it could indicate that Rafsanjani is moving more openly against Khamenei, it is also possible that he is laying the groundwork for the leadership succession, which Khamenei himself has neglected to do thus far. End comment.)

Military strikes?

7.(S//NF) Sazegara expressed hope that there would be no military action against Iran, but said that if there were, then the best targets would be, for example, unmanned Iranian oil platforms in the Gulf. This would be an effective show of strength and warning to the Iranian government, he claimed. Asked what the Iran government's response would be to such a hypothetical attack, and who would make the decisions, Sazegara said the final decision would rest with the Supreme Leader but he would be influenced by others. According to Sazegara, Rafsanjani, Mahdavi-Kani, Judiciary chief Shahrudi and the Supreme Leader's advisor Ayatollah Nateq-Nuri would advise caution and counsel the Supreme Leader not to engage in war with the US. Some in the IRGC--but not all--would also counsel stepping back, Sazegara said. Asked what the "Gang of 7" would likely advise, Sazegara punted the question, saying that in addition to their advice, Khamenei would seek the assessment of the IRGC Strategic Studies Bureau. Ultimately, Sazegara said he thought the chances were even that Khamenei would decide to either counter-attack or negotiate.

Human rights and civil society

8.(S//NF) Asked about the effectiveness of USG statements in support of detained or imprisoned Iranian activists, Sazegara said that they are helpful because they bring international attention to specific cases. Sazegara recounted his own experience as a political prisoner in the infamous Evin prison, saying that the catalyst that led to his release was the death in detention of Iranian-Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi, because the case brought greater international attention to Iran's human rights abuses.

9.(S//NF) Sazegara characterized the relationship between the Supreme Leader and the Iranian people as defined by two absolutes: Khamenei's absolute control, and the people's absolute weakness. Sazegara said that civil society groups have become fractured and marginalized and said that he and others are working to unify the groups and bring them back into relevance.

Block Iran's oil revenue, then negotiate

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10.(S//NF) Citing Iranian economist Mohammad Tabibian, Sazegara asserted that Iran's oil revenue is its key financial weakness and that though the banking sanctions are having an effect, for the sanctions to be truly effective, they must directly target Iran's oil revenue. Sazegara suggested that once Iran's financial access to its oil revenue has been blocked, the international community should offer Iran a negotiations process similar to the Helsinki process, through which Iran would be allowed access to a specified percentage of oil revenue if it takes certain actions. However, Sazegara cautioned against establishing parameters for how the Iranian government spends that revenue. Do not repeat the "Oil-for-Food" program that was implemented with Iraq, he warned.

11.(S//NF) Sazegara asserted that the first item on the proposed negotiations agenda should be Iranian civil society rather than the issues of Iran's nuclear program or support for terrorism. In order of importance, Sazegara said that the conditions for releasing Iran's oil revenue should be that Iran: 1) issues a general pardon for all detained and imprisoned civil society and rights activists, political dissidents, and journalists; 2) allows for a free press (i.e. discontinues censorship of publications and arrests/intimidation of journalists and editors); 3) holds a free election without candidate qualification by the government. He stressed, however, that the general pardon was the most important item. Asked what would prevent the Iranian government from simply re-arresting or

otherwise threatening the activists who would be released under the proposed general pardon, Sazegara had no recommendation and instead emphasized the importance of the general pardon for mobilizing civil society.

¶12. (S//NF) Comment: Mohsen Sazegara is unabashedly a proponent of fostering a "velvet revolution" in Iran and claimed be working with other activists among the US and European diaspora to mobilize Iranian civil society toward that end. IRPO is unable to assess his access, but some of his information tracks with other reporting. Sazegara served as an IRGC officer in the years after the 1979 revolution and held several government posts in Iran until 1989. He later embraced the reform movement and published several reformist newspapers. He was arrested and imprisoned in 2003 and upon his release he left Iran for the UK, and then the US. Sazegara is currently a scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and also recently started a new think-tank called the Research Institute for Contemporary Iran. In addition, he has set up two Farsi-language websites, www.rahbordonline.com and www.pishraftonline.com; the first is targeted toward students, and the second contains translated articles related to economics.

ASGARD